

Giselle Chamma Puts Cinematic Career on the Road in Rio

Giselle Chamma is a New York-based cinematographer with a storybook background. She started out as a still photographer in her native Brazil and her success and talent led to increasingly high profile, including one of her still photos being chosen for a *Playboy* magazine cover featuring a woman wrapped in two snakes. She also shot stills of jiu-jitsu fighter Rickson Gracie, one of which was the color centerpiece in Bruce Weber's book *Rio de Janeiro*. She worked as a stills photographer on films in Brazil.



"That's when I got interested in cinematography," she says. "Life is about motion. With still photography I can tell a story in 24 photographs where each picture is one emotion. With motion picture film, I shoot 24 frames a second and can capture the entire range of human emotion."

Chamma decided to continue her education at **New York University's** graduate film program. She had her pick of projects to shoot because most of her peers wanted to be writers or directors. Her cinematography teacher, Beda Batka, encouraged her to apply for the EASTMAN Scholarship Award. To her surprise, she won and also received a Warner Brothers Internship for Cinematography.

The Warner Bros. internship prize included a trip to Los Angeles to spend several weeks on the set of *Room for Two*, a TV series photographed by six-time Emmy winner George Spiro Dibie, ASC.

"He (Dibie) introduced me to the world of television, which I had never seen outside of my living room," says Chamma. "There were four cameras, four dolly tracks and it was shot on film with a live audience. I saw how much more lighting is required for situation comedies, where they frown upon unmotivated shadows."

"Mr. Dibie explained the step-by-step process of putting together a television show," she recalls. "I learned that on the set the cinematographer is there to serve the project. I saw Mr. Dibie also inspired great camaraderie and a great sense of trust on the set. This lesson I never forgot."

Back in New York, Chamma continued shooting low -- and no-budget projects. By the mid-1990s, she was getting enough work to stay busy and find occasional creative fulfillment. A milestone came in 1998 when she photographed *Personals*, a feature done with a first-time director.

"It was an incredibly tight shooting schedule, 19 days, and I was hired two weeks before production began," she recalls. "I learned that when making low-budget films you can never give up."

Chamma has subsequently lensed a feature film, *Taxi Dance*, for Austrian director Susi Graf, a short film for actress/director Daryl Hannah, numerous commercials and music videos, short films for Showtime Network, and a home video project for children.

"Communication is a crucial element of the art of filmmaking," Chamma says. "The more

I know from the director, the better it is. I find out how he or she feels about the script, what movies they like, everything. The director gives me a mood to interpret. Then I write that mood with light in the same way a writer uses words. What I give to them depends on what they give to me."

What advice does she offer aspiring cinematographers?

"You have to believe in yourself and have faith," she says. "One thing that I see repeatedly is that besides craft, a good, persevering attitude and hard work are tools that are essential to staying in this business. You need to stay abreast of all new technology. Recently, I have been studying digital video but my true love is film. Either way, nothing can substitute for a great story and lighting. When I came here (the U.S.), I had no idea what to expect. The level of acceptance of my work has been very inspiring. That's what makes all the difficult projects worthwhile."